

MY PAPA'S WALTZ

THEODORE ROETHKE

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- ▶ Theodore Roethke hardly fits anyone's image of the stereotypical high-minded poet-intellectual of the 1940s through 1960s.
- ▶ Born in Saginaw, Michigan, his father was a German immigrant who owned and ran a 25-acre greenhouse.
- ▶ Though as a child he read a great deal and as a high school freshman he had a Red Cross campaign speech translated into 26 languages, he suffered from issues of abandonment and loss, and his lack of self-esteem led him to strive to be accepted by peers.
- ▶ When he was 14, his father died of cancer and his uncle committed suicide.
- ▶ He attended the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he adopted a tough, bear-like image (weighing over 225 pounds) and even developed a fascination with gangsters. Eccentric and nonconformist—he later called himself “odious” and “unhappy”—Roethke yearned for a friend with whom he could talk and relate his ambitions.
- ▶ Poet and writer James Dickey once named Roethke the greatest of all American poets: “I don't see anyone else that has the kind of deep, gut vitality that Roethke's got. Whitman was a great poet, but he's no competition for Roethke.”
- ▶ His difficult childhood, his bouts with bipolar disorder, and his ceaseless search for truth through his poetry writing led to a difficult life, but also helped to produce a remarkable body of work that would influence future generations of American poets to pursue the mysteries of one's inner self.



*"What we need are more people who
specialize in the impossible."*

Theodore Roosevelt

MY PAPA'S WALTZ

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

OVERVIEW


- ▶ “My Papa’s Waltz” is a poem written by Theodore Roethke (1908-1963).
- ▶ The poem was first published during 1942 in Hearst Magazine and later in other collections, including the 1948 anthology *The Lost Son and Other Poems*.
- ▶ Roethke began writing poetry while in high school, and began his attempt at approaching poetry more seriously while in graduate school at the University of Michigan.
- ▶ Years before the publication of "My Papa's Waltz," Roethke began suffering from manic depression and was hospitalized in 1935. Roethke continued to struggle with his bipolar disorder for the entirety of his career.
- ▶ Roethke is believed to have begun "My Papa's Waltz" in 1941. The poem was first published in Hearst Magazine in 1942
- ▶ The poem takes place sometime during the poet's childhood and features a boy who loves his father, but is afraid of him. The boy is waltzing with his father, who is drunk and described as having battered knuckles and dirty palms. “My Papa’s Waltz” deals with themes of family, relationships, conflict, fear, and love. Like other pieces written by Roethke, “My Papa’s Waltz” draws from the poet's relationship with his father. “My Papa’s Waltz” is considered to be one of Roethke's best works. It fits into the wider context of Roethke's work due to the role the father plays in the narrative.

- ▶ The last line of the poem, “Still clinging to your shirt,” indicates that the waltz and events that transpired had happened before and would happen again, reinforcing that the boy loves his father, despite the way he is treated
- ▶ Your breath smelled so strongly of whiskey that it would make a small boy like me woozy. But I hung onto you as hard as I could anyway. It wasn’t easy to dance with you.
- ▶ We danced around the kitchen, loudly and roughly, until we knocked the pans from the kitchen shelf. My mother’s face was stuck in a permanent frown.
- ▶ You held my wrist with your hand; I could see that one of your knuckles was bruised. Every time you missed a step in the dance, my right ear scraped against your belt buckle.
- ▶ You beat the rhythm of the dance on my head with your hard, dirty palm. Then you danced me off to bed, while I clung to your shirt.

- ▶ In the first stanza, the speaker of the poem describes how the whiskey on his father's breath "could make a small boy dizzy."
- ▶ It's clear that the speaker is remembering a time when his drunken father spun him around as a child.
- ▶ This spinning is part of a game Roethke himself often played with his father, but in retrospect the dance seems dangerous and unsettling to readers.
- ▶ The speaker "hung on like death," clinging to his father, perhaps in fear. "Such waltzing was not easy," the speaker says, using understatement to great effect.
- ▶ In the second stanza, the dance moves into the kitchen, where the speaker and his father "romped until the pans/ Slid from the kitchen shelf."
- ▶ The word "romped" has two meanings: one, the innocent if energetic form of play children often engage in, and two, the violent "romp" of a man too drunk to be gentle with his son.
- ▶ Meanwhile, the speaker's mother stands off to the side, watching the two men waltz. The speaker describes how her mouth "could not unfrown itself," but he makes no mention of her trying to stop the dance.

► Multiple Interpretations

- The poem is open to a variety of interpretations. Some readers may see the scene as one of love, an affectionate time between a father and son. Others may see a horrific alcoholic incident. More likely, it is both. The poem is intended to be a matter of perception. The speaker's memory of the incident is colored by the intervening years. It is possible that he was afraid at the time but now remembers the scene with affection. However, the opposite is also possible, that he only now from the position of the adult speaker realizes the peril in which he was put.
- The father is drunk at the time of the incident, as evidenced by both his whiskey-scented breath and his thoughtlessness for his son's comfort. The statement that the whiskey could make him dizzy implies that this is not a small amount of whiskey. The father is quite drunk, which is also evidenced by his conduct. There is certainly the possibility of violence in the poem. The father is careless about his son's ear scraping his belt buckle. The phrase "beat time" implies that Papa is hitting his son's head pretty hard. A more neutral phrase would have been "kept time," which would have implied patting. Also, the fact that the son held on "like death" implies that he is afraid of falling or fearful of upsetting his father by losing his grip. Later, he describes himself as "clinging" to his father's shirt, which seems more affectionate than a death grip.
- However, not all drunks are violent, and the memory may be a happy one. The word *romp* implies that this is the case.

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- ▶ Roethke could have chosen a negative word such as stomped or a neutral one such as galloped to capture the same movement. The choice of romped implies that Roethke wanted to put a positive spin on the memory. Perhaps the father has merely had one too many and wants to have boisterous fun with his son. He may be oblivious to how badly he is failing or to the imbalance of power that makes his son hang on and keep dancing even though he may be afraid.
 - ▶ The conclusion is likely that the poem is neither positive nor negative. No human relationship is all one or the other, and this father-son relationship is no exception. Roethke's father died of cancer when he was 14 years old, so he was probably trying to piece together his memories of his father.